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Jiao Yuqiao, 15, and Chen Qiong, 17, could soon see china overtake the U.S. as the world's biggest economy. What does that mean for both nations?

By Michael Wines in Beijing

Photos by David G. McIntyre

Like many Chinese teenagers, Jiao Yuqiao's schedule is dominated by academics. Last May, that meant his school day began with mandatory calisthenics at 7:30, followed by classes from 8 to 4, an hour-long review session, dinner, then homework until 11.

Over the weekend, Jaio (*pronounced "jow"*)—then a 15-year-old 9th-grader at a Beijing public school—was taking extra courses on Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons. All this effort was aimed at scoring well on the senior high school entrance exam, known as the *zhongkao* (*pronounced "jong kow"*). Jiao, the son of an engineer and a teacher, was shooting for School Number 31, one of the best in his district for 10th through 12th grade. (High school in China doesn't include 9th grade.) "Several days ago, my grandfather came," Jiao said. "He said, 'You are the only son in your family—we place all the hope on you. So you had better get into the best university.' Now I am totally focused on the *zhongkao*."

The 115 million Chinese between ages 14 and 18 are the first generation to come of age as China assumes its new role as a global power. As adults, they will live in a nation that could pass the United States as the world's largest economy. Never has China held such high expectations for its young, who are pampered—and pressured—like never before.



And never have Americans had a bigger stake in a generation of foreigners. Today, the U.S. and China find themselves in an uneasy partnership: From the global economic crisis to climate change to the spread of nuclear weapons, it is increasingly difficult to make real progress on the world's biggest problems unless Washington and Beijing agree on a common path. And agreement is seldom easy, for each nation is still gauging how much to trust the other.

"China has deeply held suspicions," says Bonnie S. Glaser of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "Is the U.S. willing to accommodate its rise, or will it seek to slow down its emergence as a great power?" The U.S., she adds, "is not quite certain what China is going to do with the power it is amassing—its economic power and its growing military capacity."

Modern China was born just 60 years ago, when Mao Zedong's Communist troops won a civil war and founded a new state in 1949. Over the next three decades, the country endured great turmoil and suffering as Mao lurched from one disastrous initiative to another.

By the time Mao died in 1976, China's economy was in ruins. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, introduced free-market reforms that opened up the economy and led to three decades of explosive growth. Deng insisted that Communism—which rejects capitalist ideas such as private business and land ownership—was still China's model. But he was as much a pragmatist as a Communist. "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white," he liked to say. "What matters is how well it catches mice."

With China's economy generating new wealth, many Chinese longed for democracy too. But in 1989, when tens of thousands of students gathered in Beijing's Tiananmen Square demanding political reforms, the government sent in army troops who killed hundreds and injured and imprisoned thousands more. Twenty years later, most young people seem to accept the futility of challenging the government's control.

"You can think, maybe talk about the events of 1989; you just cannot do something that will have any public influence," says a student at Peking University in Beijing. "Everybody knows that."

Economic, Not Political, Freedom

Today, China is a global powerhouse, nearly even with Japan as the world's second-biggest economy. Beijing and Shanghai are forests of gleaming skyscrapers. Since 1999, the average income of a city-dweller has nearly tripled, to about \$2,300 a year.

That's still far less than what the average American earns, but despite the global recession, China's leaders expect the economy to grow 8 percent this year. And with its huge workforce—China has four times America's population—China's total economic output is expected to surpass that of the U.S. in 20 to 40 years.

China still has problems: The income gap between the rich and poor is growing, and rural areas, where two-thirds of Chinese live, have yet to see many benefits.

Freedoms are severely limited. China has more Internet users than any other nation, but censors block websites and online chats critical of the government. All broadcasting is state-controlled. People who criticize the government can face persecution, beatings, the loss of their jobs, and imprisonment.

But many Chinese appear to accept the trade-off of limited freedom in an authoritarian, one-party state in exchange for economic growth. They're proud of their nation's growing power and affluence and are eager for the chance to have a far better life than their parents or grandparents had.

In most Chinese households, such hopes rest on a single child. With the government's "one child" policy to slow population growth, many Chinese joke that they are raising a generation of "little emperors," used to being the center of attention.

With that attention comes pressures. Getting into the best schools is a matter of family honor. The pressure to do well on the national college-entrance exam—the *gaokao* (pronounced "gow kow")—is enormous, and students spend years preparing before they take it at the end of their senior year. Only three out of five pass, and far fewer score high enough to get into a top college.

Chen Qiong ("chen chih-yong"), an 11th-grader in suburban Beijing, wants to be one of those students. She began thinking about the gaokao in 7th grade. Last year, Chen had an after-school tutor in all her subjects, and she attended summer school to get a jump

on this year.

"The 11th grade is very important for the gaokao," she says during a chat at a Starbucks. "So I want to get a solid foundation."

And what about dating, sports, and other high school pleasures? Her school has sports teams, but students don't go to the games. As for dating, many students see it as a distraction. "If you really want to date, of course you can find a way," Chen says. "But the level of your studies will drop. They'll focus more on the relationship instead of studying."

Chen has an iPod but says she doesn't really follow music because it's not an academic subject. Beyond getting into the best university, Chen's ambition is to be "a businesswoman."

"Now the value of college graduates has shrunk," she says, acknowledging the growing number of Chinese who are going to college. "To get a better and decent job, we'll need to go to top universities in China. That can guarantee a better job."

Views of the U.S.

Jiao Yuqiao is as driven as Chen. He gave up gym class last year so he had more time to prepare for his high school entrance exam, even though he dreams of playing pro soccer. His backup plan is the telecom industry. Being successful, he says, means "having my own house and car, and also being able to have enough money to support my parents."

Still, they do find time for fun: Chen hangs out at the mall on weekends and texts friends on her cellphone. (Her father is a restaurant manager and her family is well-off by Chinese standards.) Jiao's family can't afford a cellphone or an iPod, but they have a computer in their small, concrete-floored apartment in a spartan Beijing high-rise. Both spend much of their free time online, surfing the web, or in Jiao's case, playing computer games.

In addition to Chinese, math, science, and politics—a required course in the glories of Communism—they both study English. The little they're taught about the West centers

on indignities China suffered long ago at the hands of colonial powers.

Still, the Chinese say they like Americans, though the U.S. doesn't occupy their thoughts that much. They seem less fascinated with President Obama than the rest of the world.

"I've only seen Obama a few times on TV, and I think he's handsome," says Jiao. "He's very young, yet he's become the President of the U.S. so he must be pretty capable."

There's one aspect of American life they are familiar with—the education system—and they're quite envious.

"American students—their teachers are so relaxed," says Chen, who is used to schools that rely on rote learning and little interaction between teacher and student. "We used to have a foreign teacher who taught us English, and he arranged our desks so he could walk to our seat and talk to us. Students like the American way of education."